

From Pharma to Farmer

By Mike Hansen

My wife Sue and I were awoken at 2:30 a.m. by a loud and constant dripping. It was raining hard, the wind was blowing from the north, and rainwater was leaking from the ceiling onto unopened moving boxes and running down the walls of the bedroom. When we moved into the 100-year-old farmhouse two weeks earlier, we thought we had fixed all the leaks. The leaks were not the only problems we encountered. The septic tank failed. The heating, insulation, and windows were so inadequate that we had to wear every stitch of clothing and have every blanket and comforter on the bed because the temperature felt below freezing in the house at night. We were starting to wonder if our friends and family were right. Were we crazy for leaving our cushy jobs in Raleigh to start a farm near the North Carolina Zoo? Looking back, the choice to start a farm business with zero farming experience, zero retail experience, and a head full of idyllic ideas may have been a bit crazy. But honestly, we didn't feel like we had a choice.

From C-word to F-word

The inspiration to leave the relative safety of our IT jobs in the pharmaceutical industry for farming was inspired by a disease that Pharma helps treat but cannot seem to cure, cancer. At the age of 5, my son Marcus was diagnosed with a rare form of spinal cord cancer, acute astrocytoma. A few years later Sue was diagnosed with breast cancer. During treatment, they both discovered how food affected their health and became passionate about eating well to take back control of their lives. Sue read hundreds of books and scoured the internet for information about how the right food can help improve health. She found a lot of conflicting information but with time and a healthy skepticism, she established her own idea of what healthy food is. At some point our discussion moved to wanting to grow our own fruit and vegetables and raise our own livestock. By doing so, we would be confident that the food we ate was as healthy and fresh as possible. In 2013 we made the final decision to start farming.



In February 2014 we moved into a drafty and cold 100-year-old farmhouse in Coleridge, North Carolina. We had a lot of ideas about what we would grow and raise, but no experience of how to do it. During our preparation for farming we discovered and fell in love with the concepts of 'heirloom' and 'heritage'. We discovered the Livestock Conservancy website and after studying all the cattle breeds and speaking with staff, we found that Pineywoods Cattle stood out as the cattle breed for us. We loved the idea of becoming part of a small community of farmers that were helping to bring this historically significant breed back from the brink of extinction. We were attracted to their disease and parasite resistance, heat tolerance, mothering and natural calving ability (we wanted the breed we chose to be able to birth without our help!), and the fact that they could thrive on less-than-ideal forage. And of course, they are beautiful animals!

These traits made good business sense, too. Compared to commercial cattle, at least on paper, Pineywoods add up to a net positive. Disease and parasite resistance meant lower vet bills; high natural calving and low calf mortality rates meant fewer losses; ability to thrive on less-than-ideal forage meant lower annual cost for organic hay. On top of the tangible savings these traits should give us, we should also be able to free up time from managing the herd to use to build the business. Only

time will tell if this expectation will hold true, but we are already seeing anecdotal evidence. Speaking with local farmers, we have learned that we are feeding a lot less hay than they are.

Aside from the business aspects, we expected the history of Pineywoods Cattle would make for a great story to tell future customers. Brought to the Southeast by Spanish explorers in the early 1500s, Pineywoods ran wild for 350 to 400 years and are considered America's first cattle breed. With their innate heat tolerance, they are extremely well adapted to weather in the South. We often see them hanging out in the pasture in the middle of summer while our neighbors' cattle stand in the pond or crowd under a few trees. Every member of the herd has a different personality. Our cow Blackberry, who has the saltiest attitude in the herd, inspired Sue to print a t-shirt with Blackberry's picture and the phrase "Farming - the Original F-word." Sue's a bit salty too.

Ideals, More Disease, and Not Taking Advice

The idyllic ideas of how we would farm – no pesticides, no herbicides, sustainably and organic – started to play out at Ozark Akerz in the spring of 2014 as we began to plant heirloom tomatoes and peppers in a newly tilled patch of what used to be a hay field. I'm still not sure how we got them to grow in that clay, but they did and, believe it or not, they tasted amazing!

So much so that a local restaurant and a co-op started buying them. The chef said they were the best tasting tomatoes she had ever eaten. Our heads could hardly fit through the door at the end of the day, we were so proud. During that time, we began fencing 40 acres of the farm in preparation for introducing Pineywoods cattle in 2015. It seemed an ideal spread for the breed: 25 acres of pasture and 15 acres of dense scrub, kudzu, and young trees on land on which timber had been harvested 15 years earlier. They would have a tasty variety of forage to choose from as their wild-roaming ancestors did. Since their introduction to the farm we've discovered they even love privet, an invasive species in our state.

On June 24, 2015, about 30 minutes before the first three Pineywoods were delivered from a farm in Alabama, we finished the fence. Tangerine, Rosie, and Louise were joined by Blackberry and our bull, Rocky, a few hours later. About the same time, all 450 tomato plants we had planted in the spring wilted from some unknown disease. We were crushed, and we barely made \$300 on the crop. Since then we have been improving the soil with chicken litter from our own chickens, organic raw milk, and organic kelp. We are starting to see much more resilient crops, although we are not sure if we will grow commercially in the future.

Sue and I have struggled with our ap-

proach to vaccinating the Pineywoods herd. We got a lot of advice from local farmers and our extension office, but it was mainly based on commercial breeds like Angus and Holstein and included a strict vaccination regimen. We were very selective about the advice we chose to follow. We both agreed that we didn't have to vaccinate for everything. Pineywoods are, after all, renowned for being disease and parasite resistant. When we pushed back on the many vaccinations the vet recommended, we moved the discussion to one of risk management instead of comprehensive vaccinations. The vet finally, and with much reservation, strongly recommend that at a minimum we vaccinate for blackleg, leptospirosis, and pink eye. Sue and I did not agree about how to proceed. I was fearful of losing animals to blackleg, which is fatal. The farmers we spoke to in our area encouraged us to vaccinate for it. Sue believed that any regular vaccinations would do the breed a disservice and would breed the innate disease resistance out of our herd in a few generations. After a lot of discussion, Sue finally convinced me that we should not implement a fixed vaccination regimen. Instead we would monitor individuals in the herd and treat as necessary. We do vaccinate for tetanus when we castrate animals, but apart from that, we do not adopt any strict vaccination regimen. We have had one cow contract

pink eye which we treated with antibiotics and a patch over her eye. The pinkeye cleared up and she is fine.

We have since learned of another Pineywoods breeder in Georgia who, in the 12 years he has been raising Pineywoods, has never followed a strict vaccination regimen and has never lost a head to disease. His reasoning is like ours, that the breed is known for being healthy and resistant to diseases. As breeders, we are always enthusiastic about sharing the 500-year history of Pineywoods, and it's our responsibility to consider, and discuss, how our actions may affect the Pineywoods population 500 years from now. For us personally that means being conscious about how we help the breed day-to-day, including difficult decisions about vaccinations.

This approach is not for everyone. We always outline the risks to all the farmers we sell breeding stock to. We remind them that Pineywoods are resistant to diseases, not immune to them and encourage them to gauge their personal risk tolerance as well as proximity to other herds when making their decision about vaccinations.

To Save Them We Have To Eat Them

Selling Pineywoods breeding stock is extremely rewarding. The reality, however, is that the supply of bulls far exceeds the demand, and we only have a limited amount of land to graze our herd. So, we're left with the difficult decision to take some of the boys to the meat processor. This has been the most difficult part of farming. In some African tribes, families swap animals when they are getting close to slaughter. They recognize the emotional attachment that is built for animals that you care for. Even if we could swap, the knowledge of knowing where the boys are going would be emotionally draining. Although we try to reason that the money we make on beef sales helps us maintain and sustain our herd, the decision to take a life is not a easy one, nor should it be.

We started selling Pineywoods Heritage Beef in early 2018. Previously we had only marketed and sold eggs and tomatoes. Opening doors to discussions with our customers about what we do and what makes us different from other farms has never been easy. Most consumers have little if any time to truly understand how choices made by farms affect their food. In addition, food marketing phrases like

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Ozark Akerz uses stunning images to promote their farm and products on social media. Photo by Mike Hansen.

From Pharma to Farmer

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'farm-raised chicken' confuse many consumers. As opposed to what? Bathroom-raised chicken? We have an additional hurdle for Heritage cattle. Angus has a big marketing machine behind it. Angus certifications and even restaurants that include the word Angus permeate our society. As providers of a product as rare as Pineywoods Heritage Beef we needed to differentiate ourselves but at the same time not sound too unusual.

To most consumers, a ribeye is a ribeye, with today's biggest differentiator being grain-fed vs grass-fed. We don't feed any grains to our cattle. To consumers that means we're grass-fed beef and that doesn't differentiate Pineywoods Heritage Beef from Angus or any other breed.

After a lot of trial and error, we're now adopting a multi-stage approach to communicating with customers:

Starting the conversation. It's harder to start the conversation online than it is in person, but that aside, the biggest challenge is still starting the conversation. We tried to connect with the local movement by printing t-shirts that read "I'm #CluckingCrazy about Local Farmers," three years ago. We have never had anyone comment or start a conversation about anything farming related upon seeing these t-shirts. In October 2018, we printed t-shirts that read "Graze Against The Machine™ - Pineywoods Cattle" (see photo to right). The first day we wore them we had someone ask where they could buy the t-shirt, another ask what it meant and a third tell us about seeing the band Rage Against The Machine at Lollapalooza. Each conversation led to us talking about our animals and the farm. This was the first time people had started the conversation with us, people we most likely wouldn't have had an opportunity to talk with otherwise. We've trademarked Graze Against The Machine in order to strengthen branding and continue expanding the conversation.

Communicating our farm practices. Communicating our farm practices shows how we care for the animals and the land. As with everything else, this has been a lot of trial and error. We started with simple examples of what we did like feeding our



Mike and Sue's "Graze Against The Machine" T-shirt has been a very successful conversation starter.

Communicating our products. The flavor of wild foraged Pineywoods Heritage Beef is different from grass-fed Angus, Charolais, and other breeds. But how do we communicate this without consumers tasting it first?

Initially we spent a lot of time authoring a flyer that outlined what sets Pineywoods apart from other beef. For our initial draft, we found inspiration from other Pineywoods breeders, added our personal touch and sent it to 15 people for review,

including a vegetarian! We got some great feedback and it really helped us refine the message. The final copy has remained relatively static since we started using it in early 2018. We find that the content and format of the flyer fits nicely into our broader marketing channels such as emails and our website. The photo to right shows the current version.

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specific post. There seems to be a lot of voodoo magic involved.

In order to share more detailed content about how we farm, we started a blog a few years ago. The problem with blogs is that we're not sure if they are read and no one has ever commented on them. As a result, we haven't written many posts.

We have been very active approaching local newspapers and TV news stations about our story. I am fortunate to have made a connection with a reporter at our local newspaper who serves as a volunteer with me at our county Extension office. He has written several articles about the developments, challenges and successes of the farm over the past three years. It's been a bit more challenging to get TV news interested, but this summer we got a bite from Fox8 News in Greensboro when a newlywed couple from Israel came to visit us as part of their farming honeymoon, or as they called it, their 'farmingmoon'. They are in the process of starting a farm and visited farms in Italy, the U.K. and the U.S. to learn more about farming sustainably. They found us on Instagram. Instagram has been our most successful social media platform for sales of breeding stock and for connecting with like-minded farmers from around the world.

In November 2018 we started a YouTube channel called *Farm to Brookdale* to share our life with Sue's mom, who lives at an Alzheimer's care unit in Arizona. As of writing this article, we have uploaded seven episodes, sharing everything from feeding chickens to sampling homemade wild-crafted beer. The feedback from Brookdale has been very positive and it didn't take long for friends and customers to take notice as well.

I had never done any serious video production before and initially the process was intimidating. But after a little research I found an app that was easy to use and has made learning video production and editing enjoyable. I use Splice on my iPhone. It is free and does everything I need it to do plus it has a library



Pineywoods cow and calf. Photo by Mike Hansen.

of free-to-use music that I can overlay as background music for the video. Unlike for our blog, we can measure viewing rates and engagement via the YouTube channel. In the first month we had 433 views

with over 1200 minutes of video being viewed by 180 people. I'm not sure if this is good or bad (more learning required!) but being able to measure how much our followers watch is a big advantage over blogs. We are making the videos for Sue's mom so we feel like the time invested is really paying off because she (and the other residents and staff of Brookdale) enjoy the videos. The fact that others are watching them too is a bonus.

Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube each have a unique place as channels of communication and make it easy to share farm life in various guises. Instagram and Facebook work well for sharing spontaneous glimpses, YouTube for more in-depth stories. At the end of the day we realize that our efforts to engage and communicate with our customers and followers online and in-person will continue to evolve as they have over the past four years. Whatever this evolution brings, we will continue to share the journey the animals we care for take us on and the sustainable and healthy life we are building for ourselves on the farm. ❖

Mike Hansen is co-founder of Ozark Akerz Sustainable Farm with his wife, Sue Meyer. They sell Pineywoods Heritage Beef, breeding stock, and semen. Their approach to marketing is grounded in a deep passion for sharing their own personal farming experience. Prior to starting Ozark Akerz, Mike founded Exco InTouch, a pioneer of mobile technology in the pharmaceutical industry. You can connect with Mike on LinkedIn (linkedin.com/in/mikehansen/) or via ozarkakerz.com.



PINEYWOODS HERITAGE BEEF

A True Southern Breed

Centuries ago, Pineywoods Cattle ran wild in the south-eastern U.S. Ozark Akerz Farm is part of a small community of independent-minded farmers bringing this historically significant and rare breed back to the dinner table of a lucky few.

Our Pineywoods herd has free access to a diverse range of forages like their ancestors were accustomed to in the wild. On the farm they enjoy grass, wild herbs and other native plants, shrubs, vines and trees that impart a clean beefy flavor, a flavor best savored one bite at a time.

Ozark Akerz premium beef is dry aged to deepen and enrich this pure flavor. We invite you to try the healthy experience our beef offers and see what you have been missing. In addition to delighting in the age-old classic beef flavor that is accentuated by wild foraging, you will enjoy the satisfaction of bringing this historic breed back to the modern table.

The Taste of American History

Only Wild Foraged
Never Grain Fed

Dry Aged for Full Flavor

A Unique Culinary Experience

Born and Raised in North Carolina

OZARK AKERZ FARM
2857 Parks XRoads
Church Rd, Coleridge, NC
336-824-1031

www.ozarkakerz.com

@ozarkakerz

We hope you enjoyed reading about Mike and Sue's journey with Pineywoods cattle. You'll soon hear more from Mike in a special request to support The Livestock Conservancy. Be on the lookout!